

Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project
Labor Archives of Washington
University of Washington Libraries Special Collections

Carmen Figueroa
Delivery Driver, GrubHub and Postmates
Volunteer, Working Washington

Narrator: Carmen Figueroa

Interviewers: Conor Casey

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CONOR CASEY 00:00:23

Good morning. This is Conor Casey, from the Labor Archives of Washington at the University of Washington Libraries. This is the Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project. I'm talking today with Carmen Figueroa, who was a delivery driver, and has been engaged in work during the time of the pandemic over these past couple of years. It's June 29, 2022. I'm recording from my office at the University of Washington Libraries. And Carmen, I wonder if you can say that--you--it's okay to record this interview.

CARMEN FIGUEROA 00:00:56

Yes, it's okay to record this interview.

CONOR 00:00:58

Okay, thank you. And I wonder if you could identify yourself and spell out your name if you feel comfortable?

CARMEN 00:01:04

Sure. My name is Carmen Figaro. First name Carmen, C-A-R-M-E-N, and Figueroa is F, as in Frank, F-I-G-U-E-R-O-A.

CONOR 00:01:14

Thank you. And where are you recording from today, Carmen?

CARMEN 00:01:18

I am recording from my living room in Shoreline.

CONOR 00:01:21

Oh, cool. Okay, thanks. And I wonder if you feel comfortable with some of the first part of the interview, you may remember is about demographic information. And part of that is we don't want to make any normative assumptions about people. That's the way people often research they want to know about different experiences of different types of people during the pandemic. So that's one of the reasons why we ask that. So if you're comfortable, I wonder if you could say, how old you are, and where you were born.

CARMEN 00:01:47

I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii. 1975. And I cannot remember if I'm 47 or 48 right now. (laughs)

CONOR 00:01:59

I've had a year like that, too. (laughs) And then what gender, if any, do you identify with? What are your preferred pronouns?

CARMEN 00:02:06

Female.

CONOR 00:02:07

Okay. And then what race or ethnicity do you identify as, and how important is that racial or ethnic background to you?

CARMEN 00:02:14

I'm Puerto Rican, German, Irish, Cheyenne Indian. (pauses) I guess because I'm--and I was born in Hawaii--so I guess because I'm so mixed, it's not that important to me. (laughs) I know that it's a strange thing to say, but it's really not. Yeah, it's not that important to me. I prefer to be described as like a light skinned black person or, like, not white. Yeah.

CONOR 00:02:52

You said, you mentioned being born in Honolulu. Do you feel like that kind of aligns with some of the larger Hawaiian culture, which is such a great mixture of different people coming together?

CARMEN 00:03:03

I think so, yeah. Just because--it's just--it is such a great mixture of everyone coming together. I never really experienced racism until I moved here. (laughs) So, yeah.

CONOR 00:03:20

Nice distinction for Washington. (laughs) And so can you talk about what social, political, or ethnic, or racial, or religious communities that you regularly connect with or participate with?

CARMEN 00:03:36

When I was small we were Christian, and then we were Catholic, and then we went back to Christian and so now I'm just--I just believe in a higher power, not necessarily like God or Jesus or anything, just sort of like a higher power, I believe that there is something out there that could guide us. And what were the other questions? (laughs)

CONOR 00:04:08

I think this was sort of trying to get out like what civic or community or cultural organizations are you regularly part of to kind of get a sense of how you fit within the community and, you know, your activism, your, you know, community activities.

CARMEN 00:04:22

I would say that I'm a Democrat. Until recently, within the last four or five years, I haven't really been politically active. But now I am starting to pay a lot more attention, watching the news a lot more, not taking voting for granted. Just when, like, when the pamphlet comes, like, looking at the pamphlet and studying it and figuring out who I actually want to vote for, instead of just, you know, A, B, C. (laughs) And I guess ever since I hurt my back, I haven't really been going out much. So I don't really--I don't really have like a big community that I associate with much anymore. Because I don't really--I don't really go out much anymore.

CONOR 00:05:31

And when did you hurt your back?

CARMEN 00:05:34

Oh, I hurt my back about five years ago. About 15 years ago, I had fallen and I fractured my tailbone. And about five years ago, my back had been hurting and causing me problems, and I stood up from my desk at work and I was just in such excruciating pain. I couldn't move, I couldn't speak. When I could finally move again, I just grabbed my stuff and I went home. And my back has been not good since then. (laughs)

CONOR 00:06:18

Oh, God, sorry, yeah. Is that partly what led you to more gig work structures, because it's hard to sit or...

CARMEN 00:06:26

Yeah, because I can't work in that sort of function anymore. Like, I never know what my pain levels are going to be, so I can't work in, like, a nine to five job anymore. I just can't sit there for that long. And also, I can't work in that structured, like, nine to five, Monday through Friday because there are some mornings where my back hurts, and I can't, I can't actually get up. So I would have to--I wouldn't--I wouldn't be able to get there at nine. And then I was actually fired from my job. And that's when I had a friend who did gig work on the side. And then she--I went on the ride along with her, and then that's how I started doing it full time. (pauses) And then gig work is, like, the only industry that allows me to, like, work around my pain levels and work at, like, a pace and intensity that's good for me for that time. Then another thing I really like about gig work is, like, I don't have a manager over my shoulder anymore. Nobody's counting my keystrokes or timing my bathroom breaks. I'm not--I don't have to buy Girl Scout cookies, (laughs) or wrapping paper, or candles...

CONOR 00:07:57

Has it been challenging to--Oftentimes, people talk in ergonomics about like repetitive stress injury, like bending over to pick up stuff to deliver stuff. Has that been a challenge, too?

CARMEN 00:08:11

Sometimes I just deliver food so it's not that heavy. I don't--I looked into doing, like, Amazon. But yeah, I can't take the risk that I'd get something heavy. Like right now, like, walking up a five story walk up is challenging for me. So if I had to carry a big package up a five story, there's no way I could do it, yeah, so...

CONOR 00:08:40

This is really interesting to understand what a specific choice all these things are for you. How would you describe your occupation or profession and what company you currently work for?

CARMEN 00:08:52

So, I work for GrubHub. Sometimes I do DoorDash. I used to do Postmates, but they changed their pay structure. So I don't do them anymore, because my pay got cut in half from them just overnight. So I stick with GrubHub, try to do DoorDash every once in a while just to stay current. Just in case something happens, I have something to fall back on. And what was the other part of your question? (laughs)

CONOR 00:09:26

Oh, that was pretty much it. And I was just wondering, you know, how many years have you been unemployed in this job or jobs?

CARMEN 00:09:33

For gig work, GrubHub, Postmates, DoorDash, I've been doing that for just about four years.

CONOR 00:09:45

And I wonder if you could talk about if you're a member of a union or another kind of worker organization, and if so, for how long and what the name of that organization or organizations are?

CARMEN 00:09:53

So, gig workers we don't really have a union. I've been doing a lot of work with Working Washington, just to get things (pauses) more fair and equitable for gig workers. I really started getting more involved with them at the beginning of the pandemic just because I just thought, like, things have to change. And it's not like I have to change them, but I felt like I have to change them for me. And so the only way that I could make sure that things changed for me for the better is if I went and changed it. (laughs) So I started working with Working

Washington a lot more, became a lot more involved, and that's how sort of I came--started becoming a lot more political and paying more attention to that sort of thing.

CONOR 00:10:53

Was there like a particular precipitating event or a time when you met somebody from them? Or did they have an action? Or did you have a particular realization in your job where it led you to them?

CONOR 00:11:02

Could you remember Emily's last name?

CARMEN 00:11:03

I'm not sure how I met Emily from Working Washington. I think she's on Facebook, maybe, I'm not sure how--I don't remember how I met her. I'm pretty sure it was on Facebook. And she kept calling me and trying to get me more involved. And she wanted me to speak at these meetings. And I just didn't want to do any of that kind of stuff, I just thought, ehh, nothing's going to change. Like, that's all useless. And then the things that she was talking about, like getting us more, better pay and benefits and stuff like that, I was like they're never going to do that. Why would they do that? And so, I just didn't really believe what she believed at the time was, or she still does, is that the power is with the people, and if we band together, we can push the corporations and the political parties and everyone to our will, instead of the other way around. So she truly believes that, and I didn't think it was possible. But when the pandemic hit, I just thought, things have to change. They have to get better. We do need benefits, we do need sick time, we do work, too. And so gig work is work, and we deserve the rights as traditional employees. Yeah, the same rights.

CARMEN 00:12:54

Oh, let me look on my phone.

CONOR 00:12:57

Thanks. I'm sorry. I tried to look at a website, but I can't.

CARMEN 13:03

Her last name is Dhatt, D-H-A-T-T.

CONOR 13:09

Oh, yeah, that's right. Okay. Thank you. And let's see. And you sort of alluded to this, so how long have you been involved with Working Washington? I can't remember--did you see this specific time amount?

CARMEN 13:22

Just like I said, I don't remember how I met Emily, or how she started calling me and wanting me to do stuff. So I don't remember how long I sort of pushed her off. But when it--when the pandemic hit, that's when I became a lot more involved and a lot more willing to do the speeches and do the meetings and that sort of thing.

CONOR 13:50

Ah, but you were involved before the pandemic? Okay.

CARMEN 13:54

No, no, not really, no.

CONOR 13:56

Okay. But you--

CARMEN 13:58

I didn't.

CONOR 13:59

I see.

CARMEN 13:59

I always sort of pushed her off, yeah.

CONOR 00:14:02

I see. Okay, thank you for clarifying that. I wonder whether--and this is--I know that there's probably going to be multiple answers to this because we've been in this pandemic for so long. But can you run me through, like, a typical day at work before the pandemic? You know, sort of from the time you woke up to the time you went to bed? So, kind of, we get an idea about what a typical day, if there's even such a thing for your work?

CARMEN 00:14:28

Yeah, so a typical day for me before the pandemic was I would usually get up in the morning, I would try to get up around nine or ten depending on my pain levels, what I could do. Probably did, like, some light housework or--I have a hobby that I build cat furniture. (laughs) So I probably maybe built some cat furniture or, you know, cut some wood or something like that. Yeah, then usually I would always try to schedule myself for like four or five. So around three, I would, like, you know, whatever I was doing, whatever project I was working on, finish up whatever housework I was doing. I rarely ever fold my laundry, so I'd probably just dump it on my bed. (laughs) And then work from four or five to, like, ten, eleven, or midnight. Tried to--Before the pandemic, I would say it was really easy to make, like \$100, or so, a night. And I used to have a budget where I had to make so much money per day in order to pay all my bills. So I broke it down that way, so like, every time I went out, I would have to make this much to be able to pay all my bills. But after the pandemic, my days were pretty much the same. But when, especially when the restaurants closed down and part of the lockdowns, I started going out much earlier. Like one, sometimes noon, and I would stay out until curfew hit and I believe, then it was like seven. And then because a lot of people got laid off, a lot of people were just flocking to gig work. And then--Like the gig--the gig companies, they were making, like, a ton of money because everyone had to have everything delivered. But gig workers, there weren't enough orders for all of us. So you would end up waiting, like, like an hour for an order. And then you get to the restaurant and then you have, like, another half an hour, 45 minutes. And I know a lot of people know about the toilet paper shortage, but there were a lot of shortages around that time, there was a food container shortage. There was a lot of food items like a cinnamon shortage, rice shortage. And so a lot of these restaurants were doing just insane substitutions. And a lot of times they weren't telling their customers, so you'd deliver something they'd be like, "What's this?" Yeah, so--Oh, and then also the way we deliver now changed, we used to have to hand the person the order, but now we can just leave it at their door.

CONOR 00:18:02

Yeah, thank you for explaining that. And then how do you take breaks throughout the day between orders? Or--how do you do that?

CARMEN 00:18:12

When the pandemic first hit, and I was working so many hours to just get like--just to the minimum amount to stay alive for the next day. Some days I would like to do from like one to whenever, like seven or whatever, and just make like \$40, and just a lot of sitting in the car. A lot of, you know, standing outside of a restaurant. When the pandemic first happened and the restaurants started kind of opening back up a little bit, a lot of them were working with stealth skeleton crews. And, you know, we didn't really know what the virus was at the time, like everyone was really scared and some people refuse to wear their masks. So a lot of the restaurants would make

everybody wait outside. Now they're a little--a lot more relaxed, they'll let us wait inside or that sort of thing. And there are a lot of them that are open for dine-in now. So it's not so strict where like, everyone has to be outside. But at that time there would be like 10 of us just standing there, outside waiting for an order. And they're working with skeleton crews and it would take them a long time to make the orders. Like I said there were food, food container shortages. They would make the food and then not have anything to put it in. A lot of--Some of them got creative with like foil wraps and stuff, which was messy to deliver. But yeah, I did it anyway. (laughs) And I forgot your question, I feel like I'm just rambling.

CONOR 00:20:15

Oh, no, yeah, I think you addressed all of them. One thing I didn't realize is that the curfew applied to delivery drivers too, you had to-- (stutters)

CARMEN 00:20:24

Yeah, because all the restaurants would shut down. And there was confusion about when the curfew was. Like, did you have to be home at seven or close down at seven? So like, during that time to like--just depending on how it was interpreted, the workers would be home at seven, so they actually closed at six. And so you'd go to the restaurant and pick up an order at like 6:15, and they were gone. So like, there was all that sort of confusion. And towards the end of the day when curfew was coming, everyone was just trying to scramble to get the last of the orders that you possibly could. So it was pretty chaotic. There weren't a lot of people in the streets, so there wasn't a lot of traffic, it was just a lot of delivery drivers. We were just like post apocalypse rules of driving. Like we just didn't stop at red lights. (laughs) And if there was nobody at the intersection, we just go or just wave each other through like, yeah, so... (laughs)

CONOR 00:21:41

It was sort of like a ghost town or something, huh?

CARMEN 00:21:44

Yeah, it was, it was. Yeah, sometimes it was surreal too, especially when curfew got a little bit later. I think they extended it out to eight and then to nine. There were a couple of nights where I just stayed out as long as I could to just get as many orders as I could, just to squeeze as many orders out of the day as I could and just driving home like I would be the only car. And it was just surreal to look as far ahead as you can and not see another car and look in your rear view mirror and look as far back as you can and not see another car. And you're just the only car on the road. I always expected to be challenged by the police. But I never saw a cop car, yeah.

CONOR 00:22:41

What did it sound like? What are some--Like, could you describe the street scene or the sound on the highway when you were there?

CARMEN 00:22:47

Ah, what did it sound like? It sounded lonely. There wasn't really a lot of sound. I feel like even the animals were hiding. Like, you know how like you're always seeing like these bunny rabbits all running around and, like squirrels and stuff. Like, I feel like I never even saw the wild animals they were hiding too. (laughs) And so it just felt like you'd pass the storefront, like leaving town, and they're all dark. And in town, there are not a lot of cars and then you get on the freeway and you're the only car, and then you're the only car until you get home. And it's just surreal, sometimes I think I dreamed it, like it wasn't real. I just kind of feel like... Yeah, I just thought--it didn't sound...echoey. Echoey, like lonely. Really not much sound, like the normal hustle and bustle of other cars, the buses going by, people talking, birds and stuff like that. Like there's just nothing. Yeah.

CONOR 00:24:19

Thank you. That's a really haunting image. (laughs) So this next one, it's so broad now because it's been so long. So like, you've kind of touched on this, how has your work been impacted or disrupted by the pandemic, but I wonder whether you can reflect on, sort of, the different phases. You know, there was that first one, and then there was a second wave, and then--I mean, how has this changed over time for you?

CARMEN 00:24:44

How it's changed over time...Like I said, I did become a lot more active in Working Washington to try to get us benefits and minimum pays and that sort of thing. So I became more active in that. And one of the first things that we did accomplish was a \$2.50 minimum per order pandemic pay. And once that hit, it was only within Seattle city limits. And once that hit, and other drivers found out, everyone was flocking into Seattle city limits. And at that time, I was really angry. I was like, You guys shouldn't be here, go back to your own districts. I eventually did kind of get over myself. And just realized that, like, we're all just trying to, you know, just trying to make some money here to get our bills paid. So. But yeah, so that--there was a shortage of orders. Like I said, the big companies were making a lot of money, but that wasn't coming down to the drivers. Still long wait times between orders and to get an order, to get an order from the restaurant. A lot of times, they were working with just one or two people, especially some of the family-owned restaurants. There was one that's actually near my house; it's an older gentleman that--he fired--well, let go of all of his cooks. So he was cooking, and his nine year old granddaughter was actually running the front at the time, because everyone else was sick. And she was just overwhelmed. So I, you know, I lived nearby, so--and I had to pick up an order from there. So I was just kind of helping her out. And it was her dad was cooking. And at the time, then they were just doing crazy substitutions. So like, not her dad, what her granddad was cooking and just making crazy substitutions. Like, okay, like, this is close enough. And my goal was just trying to help her out and just be like, yeah, you're doing a really good job. And she was trying to take orders over the phone. And yeah, so it was just kind of a hectic time too. And when, when the \$2.50 per minimum, extra hit and everyone else started coming down into Seattle, the scarcity of orders became more scarce because there were just way too many people, way too many drivers fighting over the same order. So yeah, it was just a--Yeah, it was just crazy, crazy times, especially in the

beginning. Things sort of evened out after maybe a couple of months. But in the beginning, it was just kind of a free-for-all. And I think now there's more of a camaraderie between drivers. But at that time, we were really competitive with each other, we weren't helping each other. Like normally, if another driver asks me, "Hey, where's this restaurant?" I'll tell them where it is. But like, at that time, if somebody was just like, "Oh, where's this?" I'd be like, "I don't know." Like, even if I did know. I wouldn't help them. Like they'd walk into the restaurant, and you could tell that they were new, like they'd walk into the restaurant and not know where anything is or where they were supposed to stand or who they're supposed to talk to. And normally I would like help out that person and be like, "Oh, go talk to her, she's the one that's running the front end," or "She's the one who's gonna get your order," or whatever. And I'd see them walk in and look around all lost, and they were looking at their phones. And I was just like, no, I'm not going to help them. So, yeah, eventually I got over myself and I help the other drivers now if they look lost, or they look like they need help, and I tell them where the restaurants are, yeah.

CONOR 00:29:27

Can I ask a question about that? So, you know, when you feel like your survival might be jeopardized, or you know, your economic survival, a natural reaction is defensiveness, and you sort of think of yourself right and individual. Can you describe like, what was that shift for you where you started to see it as a broader perspective, like, what happened?

CARMEN 00:29:50

I guess it was just like survival, like I wasn't going to help anyone. I wasn't going to help them take an order from me like it was really competitive, I felt really competitive.

CONOR 00:30:00

But what made you shift back to kind of the mode you were in before, you know, and kind of backtrack?

CARMEN 00:30:06

What made me shift back? I guess it just wasn't really me, wasn't really my personality, wasn't really how I felt morally, wasn't how I was raised, you know? And just being angry, I'm so competitive and just like angry at these other people who are just trying to do the same thing I'm doing. I just felt like it's just kind of a waste of my energy and my time. And I just kind of felt like, yeah, like, we're all out here trying to do the same thing. So, yeah. Be nice. (laughs)

CONOR 00:30:46

You mentioned before that, like, there was this kind of camaraderie that grew out of--for the, for the drivers in general, that you've started to sense. Was that there before the pandemic and kind of went away when everybody was in competition and stressed out and then came back? Or did that develop?

CARMEN 00:31:02

Yeah, I think it was kind of there. And then like, it went away when everyone was super competitive and not helping each other anymore. And like, (pauses) my car has broken down a couple of times, and I've become sort of a master mechanic of my own car. And I sometimes help other people with their cars, because like, I can do that now. (laughs) And during that time, if I saw another driver that I knew, and they were on the side of the road with their hood up, I would just keep driving, yeah. (laughs) But now I'll ask them if they need help, or if they need a jump, or like, what do they need? Yeah.

CONOR 00:31:53

Do you think that was--was that--How were you feeling when you did that? I mean, like, what was the underlying emotion? Was it fear, anger? You know...

CARMEN 00:32:03

Fear, anger. Like, good, that's one more driver, not taking an order from me. Like they're stuck on the side of the road, just leave them there. (laughs) Yeah, so kind of shameful to think of it that way. But that is what I thought and what I did, yeah.

CONOR 00:32:25

Did Working Washington's organizing and your role in that have anything to do with a growing sense of camaraderie among drivers? Or is that not really...

CARMEN 00:32:34

I don't think so. I think it was more of a shift in my attitude. Like I said, I just kind of realized that we're all out here trying to do the exact same thing. Like they're not trying to steal an order from me. Like, there's no guarantee that I would get that order anyway, you know? So, there's thousands of us out here right now. (laughs) So yeah, there's no guarantee that I would get the order and we're all trying to do the same thing, so it's just easier to be nice. And to waste so much energy on being angry and mean and not helping other people and not like--or like--it wouldn't mislead anyone, but like, it just really wouldn't help them. So I just kind of feel bad for some of those people. And, yeah.

CONOR 00:33:38

Can you confirm whether you were designated delivery drivers or designated essential workers during that Seattle city health?

CARMEN 00:33:45

Yeah we were, yeah, we're essential workers. I think we still are essential workers. Yeah.

CONOR 00:33:50

Okay, yeah. I was wondering if you ever felt that your health was in danger or threatened as a result of the pandemic? Like in what ways?

CARMEN 00:34:00

So, in January 2020, through about March 2020 I do believe that I had COVID. And I didn't know, I was just really sick. I did go to the hospital, I went to the ER. I sat in the ER just coughing nonstop for like four hours. It was--I was just miserable, like my whole body hurt. Like, I know why people flocked to the hospitals because it was just something that, like, I'd never felt it before. Like, I have asthma and it didn't feel like an asthma attack; it didn't feel like I have allergies, it didn't feel like an allergy attack. It just felt different. And my whole body just felt like it was shutting down. Like, I just felt like I needed medical help. And after sitting there in the ER for like four hours and just not getting anywhere with any of the doctors and like--and now I feel bad because I was coughing in the ER, you know, and I am pretty sure I had COVID, I don't know for sure, but I'm pretty sure I did. And that whole time, not knowing and then just coughing all over everyone, and then having--then coming home and then just being sick, and then trying to work all those hours just to make up for--just to try and make up for the pay that I wasn't getting anymore because there wasn't enough orders to go around for all the drivers. And even with the \$2.50 pandemic pay that we were getting, like I said, a whole bunch of other drivers flocked in so that made the scarcity of orders even more spread out. So especially at that time in the beginning, and then just being so sick, and you know, trying to work like, I don't know what, as many hours as I possibly could, yeah, it was just, it was horrible. (laughs) Yeah.

CONOR 00:36:41

You're kind of highlighting this great uncertainty that we felt at the beginning, like there was no testing, really, that was publicly accessible. Did your employer provide PPE? Or did you make your own? Or did you even know you were supposed to use it at that point?

CARMEN 00:36:54

At that point, like in January, February, March when I was at my sickest, we didn't really--they weren't really talking about it on the news or anything. And then I think around March, when they started telling people, "Maybe you should wear a mask, maybe you shouldn't," and that sort of thing, that's when I started to feel better. And so then I feel like the rest of the cities and countries started to shut down. And I think that's when the first lockdown started happening, in March, and that's when I started to feel better. So that's when we started finding out that you should be wearing a mask and that there was this thing called COVID. And that's when we started knowing more about it. Yeah.

CONOR 00:37:57

When did the pay structure go back to the way it was before? You know, you mentioned that \$2.50 premium, but you also mentioned that things like Postmates had changed their entire pricing structure, so what did that look like?

CARMEN 00:38:10

So when Postmates changed their entire pricing structure, it was before the pandemic hit. They just changed it, there was no notification or anything. And then I went from making--Oh, and then another thing that Postmates would do a lot was they would have incentive games. So if you had so many orders, from like four to nine, or whatever, then you would get like a \$75 bonus, or like a \$50 bonus, or whatever it was. And when they changed their pay structure, one of the last straws for me was I just needed two more orders to get like the incentive for that night, and it was like 8:15 and the incentive ended at nine. And so I just needed two more orders. And there's a map that you can see and on like on the map, it has like red, and so the more red the area is the more orders that are there, and it's called a hot zone. So I was like sitting on the side street like in the middle of a hot zone and I just sat there for 45 minutes waiting for these last two orders. And at 9:01 I got two orders. And so I rejected on both. I signed off and I deleted Postmates from my phone and I just never never went back to Postmates because I just felt like they were starting to do stuff like that on purpose. And before it was really easy for me to get the incentives. They were challenging, but like, still, I could do them. But they had to give me the orders. And around that time, like, I felt like they changed their pay structure, I don't get paid as much anymore. And now they're not allowing us to reach the--not giving us enough orders to get the incentive. So I was just like, no, I'm done with them.

CONOR 00:40:32

And what about the--was it DoorDash who had the \$2.50 premium?

CARMEN 00:40:37

No, GrubHub.

CONOR 00:40:38

Oh, GrubHub! I'm sorry, yeah, sorry about that.

CARMEN 00:40:40

So GrubHub, I still do GrubHub. I like GrubHub a lot more than the other ones. I think I like the way their screens work, probably because I'm just used to it. DoorDash, I feel like is a little hard to understand at times. And then their pay structure, too, I don't know if they're doing... (pauses) Yeah, they have to do the \$2.50 minimum within Seattle city limits, but their pay structure is really weird because, like, they'll tell you like, "This is what we're going to pay you," like, let's say it's \$10. So, "We're going to pay you \$10 to do this order." But then after you do the order, they'll be like, "Oh, well, you're late and like this happened. And that happened. So we're only going to pay you like \$7.50." So with DoorDash, like, if you're going to you--if you tell me you're--GrubHub has never done anything like that, like if you get an order and you accept the order for and they deem it a value of \$10, then when you finish the order, no matter what happened, you still get the \$10, yeah. So for the pay structures... (pauses) I don't--I feel like before the pandemic, it was super easy to make. It was \$110. I needed \$110 a day, for five days in the week, to be able to pay all my bills. And it wasn't that difficult for me before to make \$110 a night. But now even though things have started to even out a lot more, it is difficult to reach \$100 sometimes, just because of the way the orders come down. Sometimes people just don't order. So you're just sitting there forever waiting for an order waiting for an order. And because gas prices right now are so high, I don't like driving around trying to catch an order. So I just try to sit near a hot zone or in a hot zone and just wait for an order to come to me. Yeah.

CONOR 00:43:12

Oh, that's an interesting strategy, yeah. And I'm sorry, if you--did you say when they stopped doing the pandemic pay thing? I can't...

CARMEN 00:43:19

No, they haven't stopped doing it yet.

CONOR 00:43:20

Oh, they haven't. Okay, thank you. I didn't really--Oh, that's interesting, because some places, like I think the grocery stores did, or at least they tried to stop?

CARMEN 00:43:28

Yeah, I heard that on the news that they were going to stop it. And I think that the cashiers rebelled, so I'm not sure if they did or not. Yeah.

CONOR 00:43:38

Oh okay, that's good to know. I'm glad that you're still getting it. (laughs) Let's see, what's the--where are we at now? (pauses) Right, so you mentioned the stuff about the responsibility changed, and the staffing, but for you it was a competition of other drivers?

CARMEN 00:44:01

Yeah

CONOR 00:44:02

Watching the hazard pay, so that, we got that, a little bit of a premium? Did you work collectively in any way? Or could you talk about the ways in which you all worked collectively, whether it was for Working Washington, or some other formation, or informally, to address some of the issues that arose as drivers in the workplace?

CARMEN 00:44:21

Most of that was just through Working Washington. When we did get on the \$2.50 minimum, I think we also got some sick pay benefits, like the Seattle sick time then applied to us as gig workers. And I have a lot of neighbors that do Uber and Lyft and a couple that do Instacart, and I think another one does Instacart and GrubHub, so I just let them know about the Seattle sick time that they were eligible now to get that sick time if they needed it. And my neighbor, right across from me, he does Instacart, and he was really sick, and he was still trying to work. And I told him, "You don't have to, you have this sick time. I spoke at the hearing. (laughs) I know that it passed. So like, you have this value, you should make Instacart actually give it to you." So yeah, just just helping them out. But yeah, most of my activism and that sort of thing is through Working Washington.

CONOR 00:45:46

And can you describe some of the different events that you've attended or talk about what capacities you've been involved with them?

CARMEN 00:45:53

Mostly just giving testimony, at some of the public hearings about why gig workers should be afforded equal rights as traditional employees. And speaking at the hearings, I've been to a couple of activist events, I've helped plan them. The most recent one was they put, oh I don't remember how many bags, like 500 bags on the steps of City Hall, and I helped plan that. I didn't go to the actual event but I helped plan it, helped put everything together, so they could make a display. Let's see what else have I done? A lot of their stakeholder meetings are

on Zoom now, so you don't have to go down to City Hall. So I do a lot of their stakeholder meetings and...Let's see what else have I done? And the hearings are over the phone, too, now. So you don't have to go down, so I do those whenever I'm asked. I think that's it.

CARMEN 00:45:53

Yeah, well that's a lot. Could you estimate, like how many--it probably varies, but how much time have you devoted to, you know, off-work hours to doing this kind of stuff?

CARMEN 00:47:31

Oh, for Working Washington? Yeah, so I'm a volunteer. (laughs) I *do* do a lot of work for them. Oh, I can't even guess how many hours. I would say some weeks it's like a full time job, just depending on what's going on. When we had the big push right before our first bill passed recently, when we had that big push I feel like I was working for them like constantly. (laughs) Yeah, so yeah, I can't even guess how many hours I've worked for them, like I just--Ever since I started getting more involved and went to that first hearing--Well, at the first hearing I didn't actually go to it, but I allowed them to read my letter. And I'm told that it was my letter that changed a lot of the councilmen's minds about--because they were originally going to vote no for--to give the gig workers the Seattle sick time and the premium pay--not premium pay but the hazard pay--they were originally going to vote no, but there was something about my letter that was read that they changed their minds. So they voted yes.

CONOR 00:49:02

Could you describe what you said in the letter?

CARMEN 00:49:05

Oh, I was so mad when I wrote that letter. I just talked about like how we're workers, too. Like, because I'm partially disabled now, getting to work is really difficult for me. I talked about like, I'm risking my life to get you a snack while you hide from a virus. I think I said something like that. What else did I say? I don't remember everything I said in that letter, but it was really harsh towards the councilmen--or the councilwomen. And it was really harsh towards the government in general. (laughs) Just like, what are you guys here for and if you're not here for us? You know, that sort of thing. And like, we're asking you for help, so you're obligated to help us like, that's why we voted for you. And I don't really remember what I wrote in the letter. But yeah, it was... (pauses) I kind of just let them have it. (laughs) Yeah, and I was really upset when I wrote it. And I didn't think it would make a difference to begin with. And I didn't think anyone would read it. And so I was just saying, "Yeah, whatever, I'll just get out how I feel. And, you know, it doesn't make a difference." But it did. So that was the first time that I realized that this does work. (laughs) Yeah, if you, if you--if we all band together and push them in a direction that we want them to go in, then eventually they'll go.

CONOR 00:51:02

Yeah. Wow. And then did you use some of that aspect? How did you work together to kind of come up with that testimony? How do--Did you craft it yourself? Is their talking points? Is that--How do you...

CARMEN 00:51:16

I write my own things myself. I just asked, like Emily or Mia, another lady that I work with a lot at Working Washington, Like, what is the--what is the subject, like, what do they want me to write on? And then I will write something out. For the hearings, it's usually a one or two minute testimony, so I try to keep it short and concise. And usually, I'll send it to them maybe a day or two before the hearing, and just ask them to proofread it and make sure that I'm on the same track that I didn't go too far off the deep end, (laughs) and I don't sound like a crazy person. So I let them proofread it. And then they'll--sometimes they'll say, "Yeah, it's fine to say that," or sometimes they'll say, like--they'll give me some feedback about where they want me to go. And so then I will either rewrite it or incorporate their ideas. And then at the hearing time, I'll just say it.

CONOR 00:52:31

Did you mention that--I mean, you both helped advocate for, you know, government services and policies, and then spread the word with your fellow drivers. Did you wind up accessing any kind of services or some of those things during the pandemic?

CARMEN 00:52:46

Yeah, I did. Because I was working so many hours, when we finally did get the sick time, I decided to actually take some sick time. So I took a few days of sick time, and just sort of rested. And that was like, the first time that I was able to actually rest I guess, you know? Like everyone else that talks about in the pandemic hell, like, "Oh, it was the first time I didn't have to go to work, and I could just stay at home and, you know, do this and do that." Well, like, when I got the sick time, that was the first time that I could do that. (laughs) Just like stay at home and do nothing. Yeah.

CONOR 00:53:34

Did you--Did any of your friends, or family, or neighbors, or strangers help you during the pandemic?

CARMEN 00:53:40

No, not really. I did get calls from friends that I hadn't seen in a while because, you know, when I hurt my back, like, when I first hurt my back, I could barely walk. And because I wasn't working, and I wasn't making as much money, so I couldn't go out. And then after a while, you just stop getting invited. So some people that I used to hang out with, a couple of people they called me, and one girl, she was just like, "Can you get to

Ballard?" And I was just like, "Yeah, pretty quick, because there's no traffic." (laughs) So she just wanted me to pick up her prescriptions. She's like, can you pick up my prescriptions? And I was just like, "Yeah, but it's gonna be like \$10 for gas," and then I guess word got around that I would go pick up stuff for them for like \$10. So I ended up doing a lot of that, and sometimes that really helped too because the orders were so far in between, and then I'd get a phone call from somebody I haven't heard from in like a year and a half be like, "Hey, I heard that you could go pick this up for me," and I would go do whatever they wanted and get--make like an extra like \$10, \$20 in cash. Yeah. So that's how I got through. I still have one friend who calls me all the time, he really likes chicken coconut soup. And he knows all the Thai places in Seattle. And so sometimes he'll call me and he'd be like, "Where are you?" and I'll tell him where I am. And he's like, "Okay, can you go to this restaurant and pick up?" (laughs) Yeah, so it's really funny.

CONOR 00:55:40

That's a really efficient audio there. (laughs) What do you think the most challenging parts were of living through this time?

CARMEN 00:55:49

The most challenging parts during the pandemic and during the lockdowns was just the uncertainty, I guess, just the uncertainty, just the uneasiness, not knowing, just not knowing how I was going to get through the next day. Like, I can do today right now, but how am I going to get through tomorrow? Just--I guess that was the most challenging thing. And then just being so sick, and having to drive for so many hours, and just being in so much pain and having like--Oh, this is one of the things that I said in the letter is that I don't work paycheck to paycheck, I don't work week to week, I don't work day to day, I work order per order. And so I have to deliver, I have to complete the order, in order to get paid. So just making sure that I was earning enough. There were a lot of times where I didn't earn enough to pay my bills, and I got far behind. But then we were allowed to start getting unemployment and then that really helped, too. So, like in the *beginning* beginning just not having enough money, like I only hit making like \$40. And just being like, the way that I structured my pay or structured my bills at that time was feed the car, feed the cat, and then feed me. And then whatever I had leftover, I could then pay some bills. (laughs) So get gas, get cat food, and then I could get something for me. And so if I only made like \$40, that was only enough to do those three things, and then just enough to survive for the next day. And I guess that was the most challenging thing was just, like, every day, just trying to figure out how I'm going to get through this day to make it to tomorrow. (laughs) And the world was uncertain. And I think, too, we were asked to do something that was just, like, against everything that is to be American, you know? Like, we were asked to run away and hide and that's not what we do. So I think there was a lot of confusion, and a lot of people were scared, like, we're not the hiding type. And so when we were asked to run away and hide, hide from this virus, hide from this thing that you can't even see, I think that caused a lot of confusion, and there wasn't a lot of explaining, either. And there was a lot of like, you'd see things on Facebook and then you'd see things on the news and then it was just so uncertain, so confusing, and you didn't really know who to trust or what to trust. And like I said it's like you're just trying to survive that one day and then you have all these other drivers coming down and it was just like argh, this is so very, (pauses) like frustrating, I guess, but not really frustrating, just infuriating, maybe. I don't know, maybe just a range of emotions that you would feel: uncertainty, scared, I don't know how you're gonna get through the day to get to tomorrow. Yeah, yeah.

CONOR 01:00:20

Yeah. (pauses) You describe, you mentioned some of the Working Washington meetings starting to go online as a result of the pandemic? How did that kind of shift for like, both in terms of like, I don't know, some of the app interfaces or the way you access meetings and stuff, or how you access and talk to people socially, how did that move?

CARMEN 01:00:40

So for me at the beginning, to do these type of zoom things, I really did not like it. It just seemed, sort of, so impersonal. And then it still happens all the time, where like, somebody will just start talking and they'll still be on mute. And you're just like, oh my God, like, just, like, come on, learn. But then I do it, too. So it just--At first, I didn't like it, but now--now, I think I like it a lot more because I don't have to... (pauses) I guess I don't have to be present, you know, like when you're present, you have to be--like you have to have your makeup done, and you have to be dressed appropriately, and you can't just come rolling in. laughs) But I think with Zoom you can do some of that stuff. Like you don't have to--I guess it's impersonal, but it's also you don't have to work as hard to do it.

CONOR 01:01:59

Do you feel like you had the tech, or the reception or, you know, bandwidth?

CARMEN 01:02:09

Oh, yeah, like I could do it. Like I don't have a problem with technology, I'm not that old. (laughs) But I could download Zoom and get it on my computer, and I have it on my phone. And none of that was a problem. I just felt like it was hard to make a connection with another human being, but now I actually prefer it. Like I feel like you can make a connection with another human being over Zoom. And I don't have to find socks that match. (laughs)

CONOR 01:02:49

Did you ever get sick again after the initial time in January to March?

CARMEN 01:02:54

No, I'm pretty strict with myself about making sure that I have a mask and I wear a mask outside. One of the crazy things about wearing a mask outside is that some of my allergies have cleared up, or they're not as bad now. I would always get sick when the seasons changed. And ever since I've been wearing this mask, I haven't really gotten that sick. So like I said, I'm pretty sure I had COVID January through March. And I'm really strict with myself about making sure that I wear the mask. I try--In the beginning I was really strict about sanitizing

my hands all the time. Kind of not doing that as much, like I should probably still do that. But making sure that I have a mask, I have a mask everywhere. I have masks in the car and in my bag. I have a couple folded into my wallet (laughs)

CONOR 01:04:12

Did you feel like you were concerned about your housing situation when you were during the pandemic as a result of it?

CARMEN 01:04:19

Yeah, I was always constantly worried that I was going to have to go steal a tent from REI and move in under the freeway. (laughs)

CONOR 01:04:33

Can you talk about how the--You alluded to this a bit but how did--how has the pandemic changed your social life, and what strategies have you used to try to maintain it?

CARMEN 01:04:44

How it's changed my social life? Because when I hurt my back, like I said I didn't--I couldn't go out as much anymore, and so I started getting invited out less, and less, and less, and less. I think the pandemic running errands for--well, I wouldn't really call them friends anymore, more of associates (laughs)--running errands for people that I knew, I feel like I got to see people that I hadn't seen in a while during that time, and sort of kept up with those relationships now. So I feel like I'm actually a little bit more social now than I was before the pandemic, just because I was able to sort of get back in touch with some friends.

CONOR 01:05:41

Do you have any children? And if so, did you have to deal with child care at all?

CARMEN 01:05:52

No, I don't have any children. I have one spoiled cat. He is--He's right there, looking at you. (laughs)

CONOR 01:06:00

What's your cat's name?

CARMEN 01:06:02

His name is Jasper. He's a mixed Maine Coon. He's about 20 pounds. You can't--I would show him to you, but he's--I built his cat tree and he's all the way at the top of it towards the ceiling. And there's like a little window that he kind of looks out at me from, but he just put his head down. So all you--If I turn the camera towards him, all you see is sort of like a fluffy rug. (laughs)

CONOR 01:06:34

You mentioned the cat tree and that you make cat furniture.

CARMEN 01:06:38

Yeah.

CONOR 01:06:38

And that it's a hobby. Is it also something that is like a strategy for money making? Like do you sell pieces, too?

CARMEN 01:06:44

I started to sell pieces. Recently, I'm gonna start working on one for a friend. She wants like a big, big thing. And so because my kitties are Maine Coon and I've always had Maine Coon, sometimes regular cat furniture--like, Maine coons are large breed of cat. So regular cat furniture, they don't fit. They're too heavy for them, so they collapse down. So I just have always just made my kiddies their own furniture. And like I said, it's been a hobby, and I would make things for people. But it's only been--I guess since the pandemic is when I've actually been selling some of those pieces. I haven't sold a lot, I've only sold three. And this one that I'm making now would be the fourth one that I've sold.

CONOR 01:07:48

Do you remember some of the strategies that some of you, yourself and some of the other folks, who were doing before PPE became more broadly available? Like what did you see that people kind of made for themselves, or how do they get the stuff they needed?

CARMEN 01:08:15

So GrubHub did offer free PPE. They offered--Sorry, I gotta move around. They offered a little thing of hand sanitizer, and I think five masks or ten masks, and I think it was free per month, or (pauses) every other week, something like that, I don't remember. So they automatically would send it to you in the beginning and then after awhile you had to order it, and I think now you do have to order it, I haven't ordered it in a while. But they were doing that. When the pandemic first hit, and there was just a scarcity of everything, I tried to go to the store and buy masks and sanitizer and stuff like that. And I took pictures and I emailed, sent it to my mom. I was just like there's nothing on the shelf like there's literally nothing on the shelf. And at a lot of the food stores, I was snapping pictures of just nothing. And so when my mom saw all those pictures, she got really scared. She went down, immediately went down to the store and she bought as much sanitizer--she lives in Spokane--so she bought like as much sanitizer as she could and that sort of thing and she sent me a sanitizer care package. (laughs) So in the beginning, especially when the stores were running out of everything I had, like a friend of a friend. He also worked as a delivery driver for Kroger. And so every morning he would send out like, "I know that there was toilet paper on this truck. And so if you go there early enough, you might be able to get toilet paper." Like, "I know that there was like, whatever it was, like rice on this truck, so if you go there early enough, you might be able to get some rice," it was that sort of thing like that. So we never ran out of toilet paper because we would get those messages, and we would run down, be there as soon as they opened. And oh, I have a funny story. So I got there as soon as they opened, I think they opened at like 6 AM, got to the QFC right when they opened, and the manager was pulling out a pallet of toilet paper. And he was trying to build a display, but people were coming in and just grabbing it. There was this old lady. And we're all trying to grab like the toilet paper off the pallet, and he's trying to build it, and he just kind of gave up. And this old lady kind of walks in, as we're all just scrambling for these, these things of toilet paper. And she comes in and she grabbed it. And then she walked out of the store. And I was just like, did Grandma just steal that whole thing of toilet paper? (laughs) I was just like, okay, whatever. And then she came back in, and I was a little farther down in the aisle, and she had the outside wrapper with her. And the manager was just like, what, what's going on? Like, he was still trying to build off the pallet, and people were just grabbing it as he was trying to build it, his display. And he was just saying, "Why? Why did you do that? Like, why did you come back in?" and he was really mad at her. And she was just--she holds up the bag, and she's like, "I'm gonna pay for it." She's like, "I just wanted to make sure I got it. And I got it in the car." (laughs) So it was so funny. We all thought she stole it, and then she comes back in with the bag. You know, the outside bag?

CONOR 01:12:40

Mhm.

CARMEN 01:12:40

Yeah. That has the barcode on it. Yeah. It was really funny.

CONOR 01:12:46

(laughs)

CARMEN 01:12:46

At like 6:01 in the morning?

CONOR 01:12:48

Oh my God, wow.

CARMEN 01:12:49

(laughs)

CONOR 01:12:52

Well, the next section is a little bit more, you know, 30,000 foot kind of thing, like, what do you--how do you think that life is gonna be different after this? And the funny thing is, we wrote this question, we thought that (laughs) we were gonna get back to normal at some point. So I guess, what do you think has shifted? And what do you think is going to shift after this?

CARMEN 01:13:11

I think what has shifted is a lot of people's attitude about work. I think a lot of people are just like, they're not going to do that anymore. Like they're not going to put up with certain attitudes from their managers or are like if they are working from home and their manager is like, "No, you have to come back," they're just like, "Well, I'll just go find another job where I can work from home." Like, I don't think people are as loyal to their employers as they used to be. And I think people, they value now the work-life balance. Like before, it was just, everyone worked all the time. And I think people now don't take for granted the time that they're not at work. And I think a lot of attitudes have shifted towards work. And I don't think that employers have shifted their thinking. (pauses) So like as a gig worker, I'm going to the stakeholder meetings and stuff like some of the good companies will be like, "Well, if we give you benefits then you have to work these many hours and we have more control over you." And I just thought, well why is giving somebody benefits, allow you to control them in such a way, where you, the employer, now dictates when and where you work, how you work, the intensity that you work at? You're not allowed to like badmouth your employer on Facebook, so they control your social media to some extent. And so why is giving somebody benefits, or fair pay, allow an employer to be able to treat somebody like that? And so I think employers still think that, but employees don't. (laughs) So, employees are like, No, you're gonna give me these benefits, and I'm still gonna do what I want to, when I want to do it. And so, I think there's a big shift in a mindset of how people think about work right now.

CONOR 01:15:50

What did surprise you most?

CARMEN 01:15:51

What surprised me most? (pauses) I think what surprised me most was just how (pauses) selfish, I guess, people became, like hoarding, like hoarding the toilet paper. Like the little old lady, she was gonna make sure she got that toilet paper, she--did she--it looked like she'd stolen it. And, you know, that sort of thing. And people just gave, you know, something that they wanted was on the shelf that would buy them all. And just how cutthroat and selfish people became and how quick that was. And even me, you know, like, my mindset changed too, like, I became selfish and cutthroat and I would knock an old lady down for the last thing of, you know, whatever I wanted. So I didn't knock anyone down, but like, you know what I mean, if it came down to it, I was gonna get what I needed and I was not gonna let anyone else stop me from doing that. And just how quick people went into a survival mode and just how quick that happened. And I guess (pauses) how selfish people became, like nobody--and like I said, I wasn't even helping other people. And like, just I think that surprised me the most is just how quick people shifted into survival mode. I'm not going to help anyone, I'm not gonna let anyone stop me from doing what I want when I want it. I might riot over the last can of beans, you know, like that sort of thing. Like I just I guess that surprised me the most, of how quick people--how quick people went down into survival mode and how they did it, yeah. And even for myself, too, I'm including myself in that.

CONOR 01:18:41

What are the positive experiences?

CARMEN 01:18:45

Huh?

CONOR 01:18:46

Have you had any positive experiences that surprised you? Or came up about?

CARMEN 01:18:56

None really, just because like now I don't really see anyone because I leave everything out the door. So I don't really see all the customers anymore, so don't really interact with them. I can't really think of anything positive, I guess nothing really stands out. No, I'm sorry.

CONOR 01:19:36

That's that's real. (laughs) Are there any other thoughts that you'd like to share or any stuff that we should have covered but maybe we didn't talk about?

CARMEN 01:19:48

No, I don't think so. No. (pauses) I'm trying to think of like what, what else would happen like especially during the beginning of the pandemic, like I was--like I said, being just the only car on the road, and how there was one night where my roommate was out of town, and I just felt like I needed to see another person. And I got in my car, and I just drove around, and around, and around, and around, and just drove around the city all night. And I was just like, I'm not going to go home until I see another person. And like, I was the only car. And it was really early in the morning, like, maybe six or seven where I started to see other cars, but I was like, no, I want to see a person. And so I didn't see another person until around eight o'clock in the morning. And I was just like, okay, I'm not the last person on Earth. (laughs) And so then I hope. So like, just crazy things like that would happen, yeah. (laughs)

CARMEN 01:21:12

Like I said, too, I always expected to be challenged by police. Especially because since I would stay out until curfew. Like if curfew was at seven, like I would stay out until seven just trying to squeeze the last order out of the day. And so you're supposed to--like there was some confusion whether you're supposed to be home by seven, or going home by seven. And so, I don't remember where I got it from, but there was this little card that you could just hold up to your window explaining that you're an essential worker, you didn't have to roll down your windows for the cops, and I had that taped to my dashboard. And I never, during the whole time, I never saw another cop. Like, I see them now. But at that time, I never saw a cop car. I always expected to be challenged by the police, and I never saw one, yeah. Especially like when I would be going home and curfew was at seven, and so there weren't a lot of cars and then the closer I would get to home, the less cars there would be. And so--or like--there's some times where I'll be like the only car. Like I said, as far ahead as you can see as far back as you could see on the freeway, I was the only, in both directions, I was the only person. And so, I don't remember why I started talking about this, but (laughs) I never, never saw, never saw a cop car the whole time. (pauses) And always expected to be challenged but never, never was.

CONOR 01:21:12

Yeah.

CONOR 01:23:06

Well, thank you so much for taking the time to share your story with us. I really appreciate it.

CARMEN 01:23:14

Thank you, yeah.

CONOR 01:23:16

And if it's okay with you, I will stop recording but I'll stay on the line so we can just finish up.

CARMEN 01:23:22

Sure.

CONOR 01:23:22

Okay, thank you.